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# Our Biggest Little Russian Bookshop

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WASHINGTON — At a huge book-filled warehouse in Rockville, a Maryland suburb of the nation's capital, Dr. Zhivago and Scarlett O'Hara speak the same language: Russian.

In fact, so does nearly everyone at the Victor Kamkin Bookstore, a 12,000-square-foot brick building with an inventory of more than 150,000 publications and recordings that is believed to be the largest Russian-language bookstore anywhere outside Moscow.

"Customers appreciate being able to converse in their native language," said Anatoly Zabavsky, the Polish-born director of Kamkin's, a one-of-a-kind resource for scientific manuals and cookbooks, political tracts, fairy tales and philosophy from the Soviet Union. "Do you know how many checks come in written out in Russian?" he asked. "People feel like this is their little Russian bookshop."

In reality, the store is not little (the post office makes two deliveries a day, and inventory is tracked on a computer). Nor, say its director and United States officials familiar with its operations, is it controlled by Moscow, as is sometimes rumored.

## A Cultural Center

In any case, Kamkin's is more than a bookstore. Since 1953, when two Russian immigrants, Victor and Elena Kamkin, opened the shop with only 100 titles, it has grown both in scope — there is now a branch on Fifth Avenue and 21st Street in New York — and reputation. Today Kamkin's is something of a Washington cultural center, a magnet of words and music that attracts visitors as do museums or monuments.

The store draws upon a community of more than 11,000 people of Soviet ancestry in the District of Columbia as well as specialists in Soviet affairs, students, Government workers, think-tank employees, tourists and Soviet diplomats stationed far from home. When the American Association of Teachers of Slavic and East European Languages holds its quadrennial meeting in Washington, one evening is usually spent at Kamkin's, with tables bent under the weight of home-cooked Russian meat pies and vodka.

Although a storewide policy states, "Never ask who customers are, what they are doing or what they buy," some customers are familiar figures: Anatoly F. Dobrynin, the long-time Soviet Ambassador, browsed there occasionally before he recently returned to Moscow for a new assignment. Galina Vishnevskaya, the wife of Mstislav Rostropovich, director of the National Symphony, stop in regularly, and members of the Bolshoi Ballet and the Moscow Circus have visited when they toured Washington.

It is because of its unusual clientele that Kamkin's has been rumored to be a meeting place for spies or a K.G.B. front. Such speculation comes from reading too many spy novels, Mr. Zabavsky says.

"Just because it's a Russian-language bookstore based in the nation's capital everybody wants to know about shady, behind-the-curtain activities," he said. "They forget that Russian immigration goes back to the

19th century. This is American private enterprise, no different than importing mink pelts or vodka."

To keep up with the demands of its customers, Kamkin's imports more than 30,000 new books and records each month from Mezhdunarodnaya Kniga (International Books) and Melodiya, the state-owned Soviet corporations that distribute Russian publications and recordings around the world. Titles by such dissident writers as Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn, Yevgeny Zamyatin and Aleksandr Zinoviev are obtained from Russian-language publishers in New York, Paris and London. Kamkin's itself

has published more than 150 titles by émigré authors, Mr. Zabavsky said.

Bound volumes and magazines are stacked neatly on high shelves, in stairwells, even in restrooms — literary criticism in the men's, art albums in the women's. And 1,500 different dictionaries occupy more than one aisle, helping those who wish to translate Russian into any of 50 languages, including Urdu, Laotian and Esperanto.

"It's a constant struggle for space," said Mr. Zabavsky, who has managed the store since Mr. Kamkin's death in 1974. Mrs. Kamkin still owns the store.

Customers who ask about books by Mr. Solzhenitsyn and other émigré authors are taken to a small upstairs room, an arrangement Mr. Zabavsky says is necessary because of the high cost of some volumes.

But keeping immigrant books apart also helps not to antagonize the store's Soviet suppliers, said Vasily Aksyonov, an émigré author who lives in Washington, whose book "The Burn" is among those kept separate.

"The policy is a little bit timid," said Mr. Aksyonov. But Kamkin's is valued by the Russian community nationwide, he added. "Everybody knows about it," he said. "It's a unique institution between two peoples that hardly tolerate each other."

As the sole source for many Soviet-produced materials, and with 18,000 mail-order customers including government agencies and major corporations worldwide (for 1,248 subscriptions to Pravda alone), the store also serves as a barometer for international interest in the Soviet Union. Mr. Zabavsky says the biggest boom in business came in 1957 when the Russians sent Sputnik into orbit. And travel guides were in great demand as tensions eased in the 1970's, when the iron curtain lifted and tourism was flourishing.

In the Reagan Presidency, and particularly since Mikhail S. Gorbachev's appointment as top Soviet leader, book orders from universities and libraries have indicated that more people are learning Russian. "Gorbachev is perceived as a different type of leader," Mr. Zabavsky said. "People must think sooner or later something has to give."